



“Off the field, Out of Place”: Understanding School Sports-Related Bullying in Mauritian Secondary Schools

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Abstract

Background: Bullying is pervasive global issue affecting multiple social contexts, including schools and sports environment. Within school sports activities, bullying can significantly impact students' psychological well-being and engagement in physical education.

Purpose of the research: This explores the lived experiences of secondary school students who were victimised within school sports contexts, with the aim of understanding how they perceived, coped, and were impacted by such incidents.

Method: A qualitative approach was employed using Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) framework and semi-structured interviews were conducted with five students who had previously reported bullying incidents. Data were analysed thematically, yielding three superordinate themes.

Result and Discussion: (1) **Bullying Characterization**-participants described verbal, physical, and social exclusionary bullying, often reinforced by competitive sports environments, while changing room was described as the primary setting where bullying occurred; (2) **Coping Strategies and resilience**-students employed avoidance, seeking peer support, or confronting bullies, though some felt powerless

due to inadequate sports agent intervention **(3) Consequences of Bullying-** victims suffered from both long term and short-term consequence of bullying experience.

Conclusion: The findings underscore the need for targeted school interventions, including anti-bullying policies, staff training, and the psychological support, to foster safe, more inclusive sports environments.

Keywords: *Bullying; Victim Experiences; School Sports; Secondary School; Coping Strategies*

Introduction

Bullying is a pervasive issue that affects various social contexts, particularly educational and sports environments. In school settings, sports and physical education classes are intended to foster positive development, such as self-esteem, teamwork skills, and resilience. However, these environments can also create conditions where bullying manifests, exacerbating the detrimental impact on victims' psychological and physical well-being (Arsenault et al., 2010). School sports, characterized by physicality, competitiveness, and peer involvement may unintentionally foster conditions for bullying, which can manifest as verbal and physical aggression or social exclusion (Coakley, 2015). This affects the student's willingness to participate in sports and lead to mental health issues (Mishna et al., 2023).

Although bullying has been extensively researched, focused studies on its occurrence in school sports environments are needed. Understanding these dynamics is indispensable for developing effective interventions that promote safe and inclusive environments. This study sought to understand the lived experiences of adolescent students who were victims of bullying in sports settings in Mauritian secondary schools. Specifically, it investigates the typologies of bullying encountered, coping mechanisms employed by victims, and the psychosocial consequences of victimisation. By centring the voices of these students, the research seeks to inform contextually grounded interventions and inclusive practice within the school sports framework.

Literature Review

Bullying represents a significant challenge in school sports and physical education environments, ostensibly dedicated to fostering positive youth development. Research consistently documents that these settings, despite their potential benefits, can become contexts for various forms of peer aggression, including verbal abuse, physical intimidation, and social exclusion Wei and Graber (2023). A foundational understanding of bullying characterises it as repeated, intentional aggressive behaviour marked by a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the victim (Olweus, 1994; Vaillancourt et al; 2008). While definitions continue to be refined, this core concept of systemic power disparity remains central to distinguishing bullying from other forms of conflict.

The manifestations of bullying in sports are diverse. Menesini and Salmivalli (2017) identify key typologies encompassing physical, verbal, and social bullying. In recent decades, cyberbullying, conducted via electronic devices and social media, has emerged as a significant additional form (Smith, 2019b). The highly competitive and physically oriented nature of many school sports can exacerbate these behaviours, as students may leverage physical superiority or social influence to intimidate peers (Martin et al., 2024). Specific locations within the sports environment, particularly unsupervised areas like changing rooms, are frequently identified as high-risk zones for such incidents (Mishna et al., 2019; Nery et al., 2019).

The psychological and emotional consequences for victims are profound and well-documented, victims frequently report experiencing anxiety, depression, stress, and a significant reduction in self-esteem (Moore, 2017). Activities meant to promote well-being instead become sources of distress, leading to school-related phobia, disengagement, and diminished academic performance. Recent studies highlight that integrated learning and cooperative frameworks in physical education can reduce bullying and foster safe, inclusive environments (Mashud et al., 2025). The emotional toll often includes a reduced enjoyment of sports, feelings of isolation from the team, and in severe cases, complete abandonment of athletic pursuits (Jewett et al., 2019; Nery et al., 2020). However, the existing research landscape is dominated by quantitative and survey-based methodologies. While valuable for establishing prevalence and general correlates, these approaches often fail to capture the nuanced, subjective, and deeply personal meaning of these experiences for the victims. The current literature tells us *that* these problems occur but provides limited insight into how adolescents make sense of this victimisation within their specific social and cultural worlds. Understanding internal reasoning-how adolescents interpret aggression, why they choose certain coping mechanisms, and how they navigate complex social hierarchies-requires a methodological shift toward qualitative, voice-centred research.

Research has identified several factors that increase the vulnerability to victimisation in sports. Individuals with disabilities, those who are overweight, members of ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ youth (who may face homophobic bullying), and those with limited athletics proficiency are at heightened risk (Kerr et al., 2016; Mishna et al., 2019). Notably, while studies suggest boys may exhibit more aggressive behaviour, they do not consistently report higher rates of victimisation than girls (Evans et al., 2016). Understanding how victims respond to aggression is critical. Studies indicate that many adopt emotionally focused coping strategies, such as confiding in family members or coaches (Nery et al., 2019). However, the reasons behind choosing silence or disclosure-the perceived consequences, fears, and social calculations are poorly understood in literature. A significant barrier to addressing the issue is the pervasive culture within sports that often discourages victims from speaking out. Reporting bullying is frequently perceived as a breach of an unspoken code and a sign weakness, a norm that perpetuates a culture of silence and allows aggressive behaviours to continue unchecked (Stirling et al., 2011; Vveinhardt et al., 2017).

Prevalence rates of bullying in sports vary considerably, with studies reporting ranging from 8.9% to 48.8% (Mishna et al., 2019; Nery et al., 2019). This variability can be attributed to differing methodological approaches and the absence of a universally standardised operational definition of bullying (Vveinhardt and Fominiene, 2019). Methodologically, the field has employed various qualitative approaches, including focus groups and interviews with coaches, families, and athletes (Nery et al., 2019; Flores et al., 2020). A substantial gap remains in the literature concerning the direct lived experiences of adolescent victims. While notable exceptions exist, such as Jewett et al., (2019) on emotional impact, the narrative perspectives of adolescents as primary narrators are still underexplored. The vast majority of research concentrates on high-income countries (LMICs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) like Mauritius. This is a significant omission, as cultural norms directly influence how individuals perceive, interpret and narrate experiences of aggression. A universal understanding may overlook culturally specific expressions of distress and unique socio-cultural dynamics that only qualitative, emic investigation can uncover. Without such regionally grounded research, intervention risk being culturally misaligned and ineffective. Therefore, a phenomenological approach is not merely supplementary but essential to move beyond correlation and into understanding the detailed personal accounts of adolescent victims in Mauritius.

These characteristics can make individuals more susceptible to sports victimization. Studies suggest that while boys show greater aggressive behaviour, they do not experience higher victimisation than girls (Evans et al., 2016; Vveinhardt and Fominiene, 2019). Verbal bullying is the most frequent form of aggression, with changing rooms being reported as key locations for such incidents (Mishna et

al., 2019; Nery et al., 2019; Flores et al., 2020). In 2019, Nery et al. examined the coping strategies of male athletes who were bullying victims and found that most used emotionally focused strategies, such as notifying the family members or coach. Stirling et al. (2011) highlighted that sports culture deters victims from speaking out, as reporting bullying is viewed as breaching an unspoken code and is perceived as a sign of weakness. This silence contributes to the continuation of aggressive behaviour (Vveinhardt et al., 2017). The emotional toll of bullying in school sports includes reduced enjoyment, diminished self-esteem, isolation from the team, and decreased athletic and academic performance (Kentel & McHugh, 2015; Jewett et al., 2019). These effects may lead to changes in sports clubs or abandonment of sports entirely (Evan et al., 2016; Nery et al., 2020). Studies have examined sports bullying through qualitative approaches, including focus groups involving coaches, families, and athletes (Flores et al., 2020), as well as interviews with current and former athletes (Flores et al., 2020), as well as interviews with current and former athletes and coaches (Vveinhardt et al., 2019; Nery et al., 2020); team captains and professional players (Newmann et al., 2021). Despite the growing attention to bullying in sports, few studies have specifically explored the experiences and viewpoints of victim. Notable exceptions include Jewett et al., (2019), who investigated the emotional impact of victimisation, and Vveinhardt (2019), who examined its characteristics, underlying causes and outcomes. Yet, the lived experiences of adolescents as primary narrators remain underexplored.

The literature on bullying in school sports has expanded in recent years, primarily focusing on high income Western countries. In particular, studies focusing on school-based physical education or sports bullying within low and middle income countries (LMICS), especially in Africa and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) such as Mauritius, are limited. This gap is critical, contextual factors, including cultural norms, school structures, and community dynamics may significantly influence how bullying is enacted, perceived and addressed. Without regionally grounded research, interventions risk being either culturally misaligned or ineffective. Tailored interventions, such as confidence-building physical education programs, have been shown to improve social competence and address bullying victimisation effectively (Firmana et al., 2025).

Despite the growing academic interest in this subject, few studies have focused on adolescents' voices or examined the lived experiences of victims in school sports environments in African or Indian Ocean Island settings. Given the lack of victim-centred studies in these contexts, this study retrospectively explores the lived experiences of secondary school student in Mauritius who have faced victimisation in sports setting. The aim was to contribute to a more nuanced, contextually grounded understanding of bullying behaviours and their impact. The findings are intended to inform sports professionals, including coaches, psychologists, physical education educators, and school administrators, by providing insights into the dynamics of bullying in school sports. Ultimately, this study seeks to facilitate the development of culturally responsive prevention, detection, and intervention strategies tailored to the Mauritian school context and potentially applicable to similar LMIC settings.

Methods

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), informed by phenomenological psychology (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). This approach emphasises the subjective meanings victims attach to their experiences within school sports and captures individual meaning-making in response to bullying. The exploration of lived experiences requires a methodology emphasizing subjective meaning-making and contextual depth. The philosophical foundations of Husserl (1970) and Heidegger (1962) provide a framework for understanding the

‘lifeworld’ (*Lebenswelt*)- how experiences are interpreted within their context. Through this lens, bullying in school sports is as an interplay of intersubjective realities formed by power dynamics, social hierarchies, and emotional vulnerabilities in adolescence (Merleau-Ponty, 1962).

Research characteristics and reflexivity

The researchers in this study are women from education, psychology and counselling. IB, an Associate Professor with experience in qualitative research oversaw the study. It employed reflexivity to ensure transparency regarding researcher influence. As the primary researcher, LK’s position as a Mauritian insider offered a nuanced understanding of the sociocultural context, aiding in recognising culturally embedded distress. However, this familiarity risked introducing assumptions that could influence data interpretation. To mitigate this, LK maintained a reflexive journal and engaged in regular self-questioning. This critical, ongoing reflexivity aligned with IPA’s double hermeneutic, acknowledging that meaning is co-constructed by both participant and researcher, ensuring the insider perspective illuminated rather than constrained the analysis.

Sampling

Table 1: The characteristics of the participants

Pseudonyms	Age	Gender	Grade	Place victimised
Dona	12	Female	7	Classroom/ school bus/playground/online
Meshi	14	Female	9	Classroom/ school compound-Canteen
Victoria	12	Female	7	Playground/changing room/corridor & school canteen
John	15	Male	10	Classroom/Online
Raphael	14	Male	9	Playground/ School gymnasium and washroom

This study involved five participants (two girls and three boys) aged 12 to 15 years from different state secondary schools. Purposive sampling, as detailed in *Table 1*, ensured the participants had experience bullying during school sports and subsequent psychosocial intervention. The zone 1 Directorate of the Ministry of Education helped to identify students with documented victimisation histories who had formally reported the incidents.

All participants received interventions and were psychosocially stable at the time of the study. Semi-structured interviews were employed to explore their lived experiences, with the sampling strategy emphasizing depth of insight into post-intervention perspectives. Ethical clearance was sought from the Research Ethics Committee of the Ministry of Education, Tertiary Education, Science and Research, and informed consent of the participants was secured from the parents and legal guardians prior to participation, ensuring adherence to confidentiality and voluntariness. To maintain anonymity and confidentiality, the participants were assigned pseudonyms throughout the data collection, analysis and reporting processes.

Interview guide

Semi-structured interviews (Sparkes and Smith, 2014) were employed for used for data collection, facilitating in-depth exploration of experiences and allowing flexibility to probe emergent themes (Flick, 2009). An interview guide, developed from relevant literature, structured the process. As detailed in *Table 2*, interviews began with less sensitive topics before progressing to detailed accounts of bullying, including coping strategies and consequences. This approach granted participants autonomy to articulate their experiences in their own words, ensuring rich data collection aligned with the study’s goals.

Table 2: Interview guide used for semi-structured interviews

Area of experience	Potential Questions
Experience of bullying	• Can you describe the bullying incident that you have experienced?
Emotional and psychological impact reaction	• How did you feel after the incident was over? • Can you describe any lasting emotion or thought that you had?
Coping strategies and resilience	• What strategies have you taken to cope with the bullying? What about social support?
Personal meaning and insights after bullying has ceased	• How do you think your experiences of bullying have shaped your overall view of the school environment?

Procedure of the study

Informed consent documents detailing the study’s purpose, procedures, and guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality were provided. As all the participants were minors, parental consent was obtained. Interviews were conducted between June and August 2024 at mutually convenient times. The participants were informed verbally and in writing of their right to withdraw at any time, and associated data were deleted. Each interview, lasting approximately one hour (50-70 minutes), was digitally recorded. The audio files remained confidential, and verbatim transcripts were produced for subsequent analysis, ensuring ethical rigor and data integrity throughout the process.

Analysis of data

The analysis employed an integrative approach, combining the idiographic focus of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009) with the structured thematic coding. This hybrid method facilitated a nuanced, yet systematic, examination of participants’ meaning making. In line with IPA’s hermeneutic principles, the researcher immersed themselves in the data through repeated transcript reading and line-by-line annotation, documenting conceptual and reflective notes. Inductive coding identified relevant textual fragments, which were iteratively refined into categories and synthesised into three overarching themes as detailed on Table 3. The final stage involved revisiting the raw manuscripts to verify the coherence of the thematic structure before integrating the data extracts and interpretative memos into a comprehensive narrative reporting.

Results

This study explored the lived experiences of bullying in school sports settings through detailed participant narratives. The analysis yielded three superordinate themes: (a) Characterisation of bullying, (b) Psycho-emotional sequelae (c) Agency and resilience they employed. These themes are presented below, *Table 3*, supported by direct excerpts from the participants.

Table 3: Superordinate themes and Subordinate themes of the findings

Superordinate Themes	Emergent Sub-theme	Interpretative Insights	Illustrative Extracts
Characterisation of Bullying	Experiencing verbal humiliation	Participants experienced bullying through derogatory language aimed at their appearance and abilities, reinforcing internalised stigma	“they told me that I’m an idiot and my face looks like a stale bread..They do not feel like talking to me when they see my face”. (John) “...they think when am timid, I cannot defend myself and they can do whatever they want...few of them have even

			<i>encourage their friends to come and bully me online...” (Dona)</i>
	Experiencing physical intimidation	Physical aggression was perceived and excessive, extending beyond the boundaries of normal play and often used as a form of control	<i>“During the break time, this one boy in my class would constantly shove me into the boards which is downstairs every chance he got, smirking like it was a game”. (Raphael) “They just looked for an excuse to pull my hair and neck. They would intentionally push me violently to the ground”. (Meshi)</i>
	Being socially marginalised	Victims reported deliberate exclusion from teams or group activities, often driven by rumours or social labelling, leading to feelings of isolation.	<i>“they do not even look at me when they are making teams to play because of a rumour that someone spread online, that I don’t like students of my class”. (Dona) “When everyone is concentrated in the match and not paying attention, they will pull pranks such as throwing water on me” (Raphael)</i>
Psycho-Emotional Sequelae	Internalising anxiety and fear	The persistent anticipation of bullying created heightened emotional vigilance and stress, contributing to chronic psychological strain. Some participants described internalising stress as a coping mechanism	<i>“sometimes when I wake up, I don’t want to go to school especially on days that we have PE classes...My stomach starts aching as if there is a huge ball inside it.” (John) “I no longer have the same motivation now when I play and you can no longer concentrate as well since you have to be careful of these girls all the time..” (Victoria)</i>
	Diminishing sense of self-worth	Ongoing bullying led to self-doubt and lowered self-esteem, where participants questioned their social competence and value.	<i>“I didn’t want to come to school because of this.. I keep on thinking about these episodes. This has stayed with me.” (John) “I no longer have the same motivation now when I play...I do not enjoy at all when I do sports” (Victoria)</i>
	Accumulating anger and emotional turmoil	Bullying was experienced as unjust and emotionally corrosive, with victims reporting intense frustration and unresolved emotional responses, describing their experience as psychologically distressing.	<i>“ I get very angry when I think about it..you get all kind of feelings..it’s like a horror movie” (Raphael) “it is very stressful...I have got used to it now..They will keep on telling you the same thing” (Dona)</i>
Agency and	Reaching out	Although some	<i>“when my mother became aware of the</i>

Resilience	for help amid distrust	participants attempted to seek support, they often faced minimisation or dismissal, especially from authority figures, illustrating systemic silence and power imbalances	<i>situation, she immediately asked me to stop playing...that's why I did not inform at home" (Meshi)</i> <i>"our PE teacher saw these boys physically assaulting me several times but he did not tell them anything... He told me that we need to fix this among man and not to make any fuss about it.."(John)</i>
	Attempting to assert boundaries	Participants described efforts to resist or confront the bullying though such efforts were often met with resistance or had limited success, indicating the limits of individual agency.	<i>"...once I confronted them as I was tired with their ways of doing things but it was of no use.."(Victoria)</i>
	Withdrawing as a protective strategy	Some coped emotionally or physically withdrawing, using silence and isolation as a means of preserving emotional safety amidst a hostile social environment	<i>"I prefer to be quiet and keep it to myself..it is easier for me and it will not worsen the situation"(John)</i>

Characterisation of bullying

The participants reported experiencing various forms of bullying, ranging from direct physical aggression to more indirect and psychological tactics. Physical bullying was a common experience. Raphael recounted being targeted during recess

"During the recess time, this one classmates of mine would constantly shove me into the boards every chance he got, smirking like it was a game".

Meshi echoed this, describing relentless assaults:

"They just looked for an excuse to pull my hair and hit my head. They would intentionally push me violently towards the ground".

Indirect and verbal bullying were also prevalent. Victoria recalled acts redesigned to humiliate her:

"Once, the physical education teacher was around...they put my lunch bag in the dustbin and sometimes they hid my water bottle... One day, I saw one girl emptying my bag and throwing my books and copy books everywhere. I felt sad".

John faced persistent verbal abuse centred on his appearance, which was intended to exclude him:

"they told me that I'm an idiot and my face looks like a stale bread..They do not feel like talking to me when they see my face".

This verbal abuse often extended to cyberbullying, which exacerbated social exclusion. Dona explained how a false online rumour led to her isolation:

“they do not even look at me when they are making teams to play because of a rumour that someone spread online, that I don’t like students of my class...they made plans without me, even the whole class and in the end, they did everything without me..”

Specific locations, particularly unmonitored areas were identified as high-risk zones. The changing room was a recurring site of vulnerability. Victoria described an incident there:

“We were in the changing room after a PE class and there were these two girls who just came inside, beat me up and went out just because I played well during the match..they said you got too much of attention and everyone was happy about the way I played”

Similarly, Raphael noted that bullies exploited moments of low supervision during matches:

“when everyone is concentrated in the match and not paying attention, they will pull pranks such as throwing water on me”.

The reason for victimisation were often linked to physical appearance and psychological traits. Meshi directly connected her victimisation to her body weight:

“It only happened because they find me bigger than them”.

Raphael identified a combination of factors:

“I used to be chubby and tall. I was an easy target for these people and on top on that I was shy and I couldn’t tell them anything”.

This perception of vulnerability was confirmed by Dona, who stated,

“..they think when am timid, I cannot defend myself and they can do whatever they want..few of them have even encouraged their friends to come and bully me online since they know I will not tell them anything”.

Agency and resilience

In response to bullying, participants adopted various coping strategies, often centred on self-preservation. A prominent theme was the “mechanism of silence”, where victims chose not to report incidents. John explained his reasoning

“I prefer to be quiet and keep it to myself..it is easier for me and it will not worsen the situation”.

This fear of escalation was widespread. Dona described a sense of helpless resignation:

“if you tell them anything, the situation worsens... you cannot even imagine... it is very stressful... I have got used to it now.. They will keep on telling you the same thing”.

Avoidance was another common strategy. Victoria detailed how she altered her behaviour to evade her aggressors:

“I tried to avoid these girls during the physical education classes. There were even few times I stopped playing in the playground since these girls will be around.. once I confronted them as I was tired with their ways of doing things but it was of no use”.

The role of bystanders and authority figures was critical, yet often perceived as ineffective or absent. Bystanders were frequently described as passive or complicit. Victoria observed.:

“those who were there at that time do not want to get into any hassle with these girls, therefore they stay away. As if they saw nothing, even when they are playing. Some girls join them just because it is a bigger group... they join hand with them”.

In some cases, even when adults were informed, the response was counterproductive. Meshi reported that after her mother learned of the bullying, the solution was to restrict her participation in sports activities:

“when my mother became aware of the situation, she immediately asked me to stop playing in the school team and limit my sports activities...that’s why I did not inform at home”.

A lack of support from school staff further reinforced the silence of victims. John recounted the dismissive attitude of his physical education teacher:

“our PE teacher saw these boys physically assaulting me several times but he did not tell them anything since he is in good terms with them. He told me that we need to fix this among man and not to make any fuss about it...”.

Psycho-emotional sequelae

The bullying experience has profound and lasting psychological impacts in the participants. The immediate emotional responses included intense sadness, anger and a sense of helplessness. Raphael described his lingering anger vividly:

“I get very angry when I think about it..it’s like a horror movie”.

Dona expressed deep sadness and social pain:

“I feel extremely sad when this happened and I felt excluded from the group..you cannot do anything”.

Anxiety was a dominant sequela, often manifesting somatically. John described the physical toll of anticipating bullying on days with sports:

“sometimes when I wake up, I don’t want to go to school especially on days that we have PE classes and activities. My stomach starts aching as if there is a huge ball inside it. I keep on going to the washroom since the morning itself”.

This anxiety undermined their ability to enjoy and participate in sports. Victoria explained how her motivation and concentration were eroded by constant vigilance:

“I no longer have the same motivation now when I play and you can no longer concentrate as well since you have to be careful of these girls all the time... I am no longer like before when I go on the playground now. I do not enjoy at all when I do sports”

The consequences extended beyond the school environment, affecting family dynamics and overall well-being. The experience of John was so severe that it led to school avoidance and his parents discouraging sports. He stated:

“my parents were very sad when they learned about this, especially my mother, she told me to stop it. I didn’t want to come to school because of this...i keep on thinking about these episodes. This has stayed with me. I do not have words to describe what I went through”.

The profound psychological toll of bullying extends beyond the individual, a fact underscored by its disruption of family dynamics and wellbeing. The enduring nature of this trauma was vividly demonstrated during interviews, which were at times interrupted as participants became overwhelmed while recounting their experiences.

Discussion

Bullying in sports among youth is a well-recognised issue requiring attention (Mishna et al., 2019; Nery et al., 2019; Vveinhardt et al., 2019a). This study explores bullying within school sports in Mauritius, examining lived experiences of victims alongside socio-cultural dynamics. Through interpretative phenomenological framework and thematic analysis, the research captures adolescents’ experiences of aggression and exclusion in spaces meant for camaraderie and growth.

There main themes emerged: Characterisation of bullying, psycho-emotional sequelae, agency and resilience- as illustrated in the thematic mapping presented in *Figure 1*.

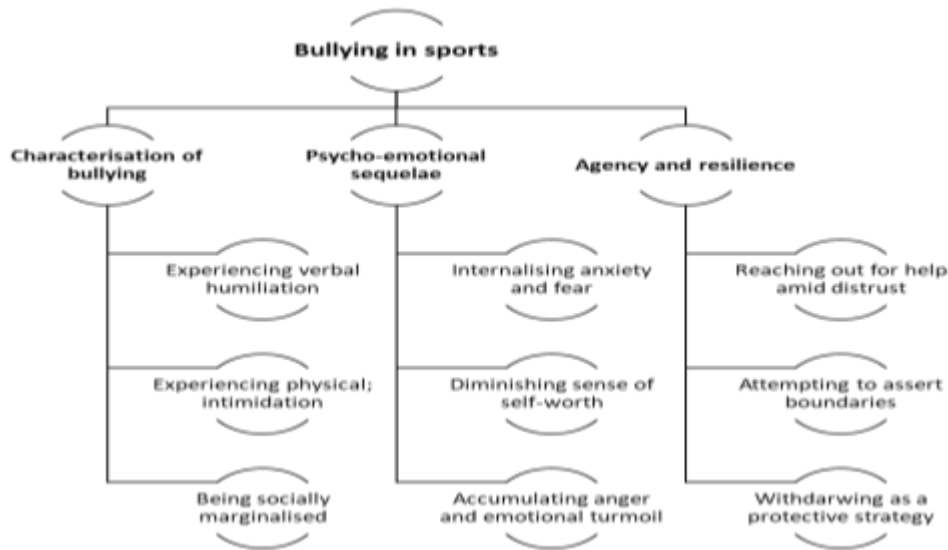


Figure 1: Mapping of key themes and subthemes

The characterisation of bullying within sports activities in secondary schools demonstrates a complex interplay of social, psychological and environmental factors that collectively shaping victims’ experiences. This phenomenon manifests through multiple modalities, encompassing physical aggression, verbal harassment, socio exclusion, and increasingly cyber forms (Smith, 2019; Menesini and Salmivalli, 2017). Sports environments, particular those characterised by intense competitive norms, often inadvertently legitimise, aggressive behaviours and reinforce hierarchical peer structures, leading to the normalisation of harmful conduct as an inherent aspect of sporting culture. Consequently, many victims perceive bullying as an unavoidable aspect of their athletic participation, further entrenching these damaging dynamics.

The physical spaces within sports environments play a crucial role in facilitating bullying behaviour. Research consistently identifies low-surveillance areas, such as changing rooms, locker areas, and remote playground sections, as high risk zones for peer victimisation (Fisher and Dzikus, 2010; Nery et al., 2019). The inherent privacy and limited adult supervision in changing rooms create environments where students are particularly vulnerable to various forms of aggression. This vulnerability often leads victims to develop avoidance behaviours, strategically evading these spaces to minimise their risk of victimisation. Similarly, although playgrounds and other recreational areas are designed for positive engagement, they can foster competitive interactions that escalate into bullying situations, particularly when adequate supervision is lacking. Within the Mauritian educational context, observational data suggest that insufficient monitoring of sports facilities significantly contributes to the persistence and normalisation of bullying behaviours.

Understanding both individual characteristics and broader social dynamics is essential for comprehending the causative factors behind sports bullying. The participants frequently internalised their victimisation experiences, attributing them to personal traits such as body weight, physical appearance, or perceived social inadequacies such as shyness. This pattern of self-blame aligns with the findings of Forsberg and Horton (2020), who identifies similar internalisation processes among young athletes. The internalisation of sports-based meritocratic ideals appears to perpetuate victim identities while simultaneously hindering the development of effective resilience strategies for overcoming sexual harassment. Athletic competence, or the perceived lack of thereof, is another significant factor in bullying dynamics. Students with limited athletic proficiency often face victimisation due to their perceived incompetence and its potential impact on team performance (Mishna et al. 2019; Kerr et al. 2016). Conversely, athletically gifted students may also become targets due to jealousy and the social dynamics surrounding their superior skills. Additional vulnerability factors include inherent personality traits such as anxiety and existing power imbalances within peer groups, all of which may increase susceptibility to bullying behaviour (Olweus, 1993).

Conceptualising bullying as a social phenomenon necessitates careful examination of the roles played by peers, coaches, and family member in either perpetuating or mitigating abusive dynamics Salmivalli et al. (1996). Victims consistently report insufficient peer support, with bystanders frequently maintaining passive stances because of complex social pressures, including fears of becoming secondary targets and doubts regarding the effectiveness of reporting (Bauman et al., 2020; O'Connor & Graber, 2014; Jeckell et al., 2020). This collective inaction, often rooted in self-preservation, inadvertently strengthens bullying dynamics by environments where perpetrators face minimal social consequences. Although peers undoubtedly possess significant potential to disrupt bullying through intervention and support, potential defenders face substantial mental health risks that require systematic institutional support and protection (Wu et al., 2016). Consequently, establishing clear and accessible reporting mechanisms and designated safe spaces are essential components of effective bullying management protocols.

The family support systems represent another critical yet frequently underutilised resource in addressing sports bullying. Victims often avoid disclosing bullying incidents to family members because of multifaceted concerns, including fear of escalation, feelings of shame, and concerns about being perceived as vulnerable (Larrañaga et al., 2018). Developing family education programs that enhance the recognition of bullying indicators and improve intervention strategies can significantly strengthen victims' resilience networks through consistent emotional and practical support. Similarly, sports coaches and physical education staff often prioritise athletic performance over relational dynamics, leaving systemic issues unaddressed. The development of comprehensive intervention strategies requires simultaneously addressing individual psychological factors, such as countering maladaptive self-blame patterns, and implementing systemic changes that foster healthier sporting environments (Schacter et al., 2015).

The psycho-emotional sequelae of bullying profoundly impact multiple dimensions of victims' lives, including mental well-being, self-perception, and social functioning, these findings are consistent with established research documenting significant emotional consequences, including persistent sadness, diminished self-worth, and pervasive despair (Hutson, 2018). The emotional burden intensifies through profound helplessness, as victims frequently report feeling completely powerless to effectively resolve their situations or alter their circumstances (Side & Johnson, 2014), the resulting anxiety and psychological distress demonstrate the severe toll of persistent victimisation (Mishna et al., 2023), while progressively eroded self-esteem directly undermines both athletic performance and general engagement in sports activities.

The psychological transformation of sports from sources of enjoyment and accomplishment to contexts of fear and apprehension frequently triggers progressive disengagement from previously valued athletic activities (Evans et al., 2017). In severe cases, victims completely abandon sports participation to avoid further victimisation (Nery et al., 2024), thereby losing access to crucial developmental opportunities for socio-emotional growth and social integration. The impact extends beyond school, affecting family dynamics and revealing the long-lasting trauma. Even well-intentioned parental responses, such as discouraging sports participation, can inadvertently reinforce the victims' isolation and compound their emotional distress. The enduring nature of bullying-related trauma became particularly evident during the research interviews, where multiple participants demonstrated significant emotional distress while recounting their experiences.

Longitudinal observations indicate persistent effects, including lingering fears of re-experiencing trauma and ongoing challenges in forming and maintaining social relationships, consistent with established findings regarding lasting personality changes following persistent victimisation (Wolke & Lereva., 2015). Unlike some studies, this research found no evidence of 'positive' long term effects from bullying. While some victims developed increased empathy for others, this is in no way compensated for the lasting emotional trauma, including chronic anxiety and trust related issues that continued to affect them after the bullying ceased.

Strengths, limitations, future directions

The primary contribution of this study its phenomenological depth, revealing victim's voices vis-à-vis bullying in Mauritian school sports as a culturally ingrained practice. The findings show that competitive norms, spatial neglect in unsupervised areas, and shame perpetuate harm and normalise aggression. Focusing on Mauritius challenges universalist models; local narratives describe peers as passive, not active by bystanders, underscoring the need for culturally sensitive strategies. Methodologically, interpretative phenomenological analysis effectively captured victims' meaning making and negotiation of agency within the context of structural silence. This study has some limitations. Its sample, predominantly team sports athletes, may not reflect bullying dynamics in individual sports. Furthermore, reliance on retrospective accounts is susceptible to memory bias, and gender disparities in the cultural context may have limited the range of perspectives captured. Future research should adopt decolonial and embodied approaches to investigate the spatial politics of gendered changing rooms, using ethnography to examine body monitoring. Intersectional analyses are needed to understand how race, class and disability shape bullying experiences in Mauritian sports.

Conclusion

This study illuminates the complex emotional landscape of bullying in Mauritian school sports, capturing how adolescents interpret aggression and negotiate identity. Through a phenomenological lens, it reveals that bullying is not merely interpersonal but is sustained by sociocultural norms, power hierarchies, and spatial vulnerabilities. The findings expose a reality in which competitive environments and insufficient supervision can transform play into predation, leading victims toward resignation, fear, and self-blame. A central paradox is uncovered: sports, which are idealised building discipline camaraderie, breed exclusion when structural issues are ignored. The normalisation of bullying as 'part of the game' reflects a deeper tolerance for aggression in sports. This crisis of trust implicates entire institutional systems and has profound psychological impacts on victims. Consequently, schools must re-evaluate sports culture to prioritise ethical responsibility, empathy, and safety over mere competition. The key insight is that bullying thrives in the gap moving beyond generic campaigns to address lived experiences and reconstruct sports environments that honour the dignity of every participant.

Declaration of Statements

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